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SUBJECT: INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION WEEK IN DAMASCUS DEFYS THE ODDS

Summary & Comment

(SBU) 1. International Education Week (IEW) programs and activities helped put the American Cultural Center (ACC) back on the cultural and educational map of Damascus. Nearly 500 Syrians crowded into the Center's auditorium for events throughout the week, transforming the ACC into a bustling hub of activity and meeting place for young Syrians. IEW's success countered the prevailing view that the ACC is closed to Syrians and that large-scale PD programming in Syria is a non-starter. In the past, potential participants in PD events were intimidated by the SARG in both subtle and overt ways and attendance was minimal. PD Damascus is planning a number of cultural and educational events in the coming months, both to continue to probe the boundaries of the SARG's permissiveness and to exploit the Syrian public's desire for engagement with the United States.

We Are Open and We Welcome You

(U) 2. "We are Open and We Welcome You," was the message conveyed to more than 350 Syrian students who attended the IEW open house on Monday, November 12th at the ACC. The capacity crowd filled the Center's auditorium to bursting for the entire five hour program and highlighted the robust cultural and educational exchange relationship between Syria and the United States, as well as PD programs and resources available to Syrian students. The open house also benefited immensely from participation by the American Language Center, the Damascus Community School, and the International Center for Agriculture in the Dry Areas, the only major international organization headquartered in Syria.

Syria's Biggest Export . . . Students

(U) 3. In the days following the open house, the Educational Advising and Testing Office, in cooperation with the Consular Section, offered two student advising and visa information sessions: one for general students and one for medical students. More than 100 students participated over the two days. The full auditorium for these programs shows that Syrians are not deterred from wanting to study in the United States, despite a strained bilateral relationship. Also, students were made aware of the services of the new advising office at the Cultural Center; countering the notion that these services are no longer available in Syria since the closure of Amideast last year.

Syrians Speak Out

(SBU) 4. A few Syrians took the opportunity of IEW to speak out to their fellow citizens. For example, a panel of five Syrian U.S. alumni spoke with a group of 65 Syrian students about their experiences in the United States. The panelists spanned multiple generations and programs: an engineer who received his MA degree in 1969, a Fulbright alumus from 2001, a recent Humphrey alumna, and alumni from the Summer Institutes and YES programs. The panelists stressed the important lessons they had learned about leadership, teamwork, independence, social and civic activism, volunteerism, tolerance, and how they have drawn on these lessons in their respective communities in Syria. In the current political climate, it is extremely unusual and positive for Syrians to speak publicly and proudly about their exchange and study experiences in the United States.

(SBU) 5. The head of the Syrian Environment Association (SEA) took center stage during PD Damascus' weekly movie and discussion series, which featured the documentary "An Inconvenient Truth" in honor of the "global citizenship" theme of IEW. A capacity crowd of 70-80 young Syrians filled the auditorium. The head of SEA spoke about the threats to the environment in Syria and SEA's main campaign issues: water conservation and anti-smoking. Stating that a lack of awareness is the biggest challenge to environmentalism in Syria, he stressed the importance of reaching out to the next generation to ingrain in them concern for the environment.

Spotlight on Nursing Education and English Teaching

(U) 6. The two final events of IEW were a panel discussion on nursing education and a workshop for English language teachers, both on November 15. Six nurses who participated in a single-country IVLP on nursing education in August-September 2007 addressed a group of 20 colleagues (nurses and doctors) at a local private hospital. They came to an agreement with the doctors -- all U.S.-educated and influential -- to work proactively to provide more training and continuing education for nurses in Syria. For the capstone IEW event, more than 60 English language teachers packed into the ACC auditorium for an English language teaching workshop led by PD Damascus' two English Language Fellows. All participants registered for IRC services.

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